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Carter's Decision on Traced to Early From Campaign Stand to U.S. Policy With

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President Carter's decision to withdraw ground troops from South Korea goes back at least to January, 1973, and the earliest days of his campaign for President. His original idea was to pull out all U.S. forces — ground and air — and to negotiate assurances from China and the Soviet Union that North Korea would not invade the south.

The origins and evolution of Carter's ideas are of unusual importance because his campaign stand has been translated directly into U.S. policy with a minimum of official review. In order to avoid a battle within the government, a National Security Council study leading to the U.S. withdrawal plan did not question whether American ground troops should be removed but focused instead on how they should be removed.

As sent to the White House in mid-March, the council's Presidential Review Memorandum 13 acknowledged that there are differences of opinion about the troop withdrawal policy and that the impact of it is difficult to predict. At the explicit instruction of Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance, however, the State-Defense-Central Intelligence Agency study accepted as its premise Carter's previously announced conclusion that the troops should be taken out.

Without making an overt recommendation, PRM-13 reported the carefully hedged view that the risk will be within acceptable limits provided that the withdrawal of ground troops is carefully managed, that essential U.S. support elements remain, that adequate compensation be supplied to South Korea for the reduction in its defense capacity and that other U.S. actions do not send the wrong signals to North Korea.

While after-the-fact justifications have been made public, there is no indication that the government review considered Carter's own reasons for the pullout and some responsible officials have conceded that they do not know what they are.

Major Gen. John K. Singlaub, who was relieved last month as chief of staff of U.S. forces in Korea after publicly criticizing the withdrawal, told Congress that the Joint Chiefs of Staff never gave its Seoul command a reason for the planned withdrawal despite requests for an explanation.

About the closest thing to serious governmental scrutiny of Carter's decision was a special National Security Council meeting which was convened to hear the reservations of CIA Director Stansfield Turner. Informed sources said that after hearing Turner's misgivings, Carter issued orders in early May that the troop withdrawal plan proceed.

A CIA staff briefing, which presumably reflected Turner's views, caused heated discussion Friday in a closed meeting of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The committee decided to ask for the text of a CIA estimate which was prepared in connection with the withdrawal plan.

Carter, in response to an inquiry about the origin of his views, replied through press secretary Jody Powell that they arose from his "basic inclination to question the stationing of American troops overseas." Powell quoted him as saying that keeping troops abroad "is something you need a good reason to do" and that he "has yet to see a convincing argument, keeping those troops in Korea in perpetuity."

Powell went on to point out that Carter has taken a different position over many months about U.S. troops in Europe, never saying that he believes they should be removed.

Carter told another White House aide that he began to form his troop withdrawal ideas before 1975. He said the Nixon administration's action in the early 1970s to remove 20,000 U.S. troops from Korea had been a factor

In the background — and to some

fundamental factors are his Annapolis academy schooling and his early career as a naval officer. The stationing of ground forces in exposed and static positions abroad is counter to traditional naval thinking. Air and sea power operating from offshore, augmented by mobile landing forces if needed, are the preferred solutions of naval doctrine, as well as the "Nixon doctrine" enunciated in 1969.

Several of those whom Carter consulted in 1974 and early 1975 believe the deployment of U.S. ground troops in South Korea is especially dangerous because they are a "tripwire" intended to guarantee nearly automatic U.S. involvement in any new Korean war. Though Carter did spell out to these advisers the basis of his views, some of them believe the "tripwire" danger is central.

Retired Adm. Gene R. LaRocque, director of the privately funded Center for Defense Information, recalled a telephone call from Carter asking about U.S. troops in Korea while Carter was still Georgia governor. LaRocque said he told Carter that either North Korean President Kim Il Sung or South Korean President Park Chung Hee or their successors "could get us involved in a land war in Asia and it would tear this country apart." The retired admiral added that "We have to think of the Middle East and Europe. On a scale of importance to us, I'd put Korea about 1 and the Middle East and Europe about 10." Carter listened carefully but did not disclose his own views, LaRocque said.

On Jan. 16, 1975, a month after declaring his candidacy for President and two weeks after leaving the governorship of Georgia, Carter told a meeting of the editorial page board of The Washington Post that he favored taking U.S. troops out of Korea and would be prepared to begin as soon as he became President.

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